

The New Normal by usa123

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Summary: In the aftermath of The Battle of Starcourt, Steve Harrington struggles to come to terms with everything that happened. Tag for Season Three. Spoilers for Season Three.

The New Normal

"Again, Harrington?"

Startled back to the present, Steve looked up to see Dr. Wilkins, the very same doctor who had treated him last year after Billy had beat his face in, standing in the doorway of his hospital exam room. Steve's heart sank. The similarities between today and last fall had already been a lot to handle, but now with Wilkins here, Steve couldn't help remembering how Hopper had stayed with him the whole time he'd been at the emergency room last year. Sure, Hopper had been clearly uncomfortable and constantly fiddling with his blue bracelet, but he'd refused to leave Steve by himself. Hopper wasn't there now, because he was presumed dead, and Steve was having problems wrapping his brain around that idea.

His breath hitched but he covered it by clearing his throat. He couldn't break down in front of Wilkins; it would be the same as punching a ticket for overnight observation. He was already surprised Wilkins hadn't commented on the lack of an adult in the room—even though Steve himself was technically an adult, he could have used an adult-ier adult by his side, to guide these events while he mentally checked out. Unfortunately but understandably, all the ones he knew, and wanted to call, were busy dealing with their own children's trauma.

So he did what he did best: screwed on a grin and pretended like nothing was wrong.

"But I won this time," he protested, stretching his grin so widely he reopened his split lip.

Dr. Wilkins just shook his head and put down Steve's file. "Let's just see what we're dealing with." He repeated the same examination the paramedics had performed, honing in on Steve's bruised abdomen, his split lip, and the massive damage to his eye. When he moved on to writing prescriptions and scheduling follow-ups, Steve was sure the end was in sight.

He was about two minutes from escaping with a clean bill of health

when freakin' Robin stuck her head into his room, out of breath like she been running, and announced, "He was given truth serum, then got in a car accident." Then, before either Wilkins or Steve could comment, she'd danced off and was pursued by two orderlies not three seconds later.

"Truth serum?" Wilkins repeated, looking incredulously at Steve. "Just what happened at that mall?"

With murder in his heart, Steve just let out a deep sigh. "Doc, you wouldn't believe me if I told ya."

"But she is telling the truth?"

Steve paused a second too long to be believable. "No?"

The next thing he knew, he was being reexamined, bumped up in priority for some scans, then booked to spend the night for observation. Being the good friend that he was, he ratted out Robin, who ended up in the bed next to him, once she'd been caught by the orderlies. Apparently the hospital was full up with sick or injured from the past few days, so they were sharing a room, much to Robin's parents' chagrin.

"Have I mentioned you suck today?" she grumbled after they'd left, while glaring at the IV in her arm.

"Yes."

"Well have it again: you suck."

"You ratted me out for the truth serum!"

"That's something a doctor should know!" she retorted. "Who knows what was in that?!"

"We threw it all up, we're fine!" Steve winced as pain lanced through his head, and pressed a knuckle as hard as his injury would allow against his eye.

There was blessed silence for a long few moments. Then Robin softly asked, "Do I need to call someone?"

"No." There was no one for her to call. "I'm tired," he said as he rolled onto his side so his back was to Robin, closed his eyes, and begged for a dreamless sleep to come.

Luck though was not on his side. Not two minutes later, a softer set of footsteps stopped in front of their room.

"He's asleep?" Dustin asked quietly. Like, *actually* quietly. Apparently the kid had volume control after all.

"Yeah," Robin replied. "I'll tell him you stopped by."

"Wait." Steve rolled over, biting back a wince as his ribs protested, and lifted his head. "Hey ya, Henderson."

He instantly saw the teary expression on Dustin's face. "What's wrong?" he demanded as he jerked into a sitting position. His body vehemently complained to the point where he saw stars, but Steve powered through it and began to swing his legs off the bed.

"What the hell are you doing?" Robin demanded at the same time Dustin's eyes widened and he hurried over to Steve's side.

"No monsters, Steve. It's okay. Stay in bed," he said, pushing down on Steve's shoulder.

Steve resisted for like two seconds, until his body—the traitor—gave up the fight. "You sure?" he clarified, not fully relaxing until Dustin nodded.

"Yeah." Dustin swiped his hand under his eyes. "They're old." Then he looked up at Steve with an expression the older boy had come to hate. It meant Dustin was going to ask for something Steve didn't want to do, but always gave into, because the kids had seen far too much in their young years for him to say 'no'.

Sure enough, Dustin held out his arms and started leaning in. "I know you don't like hugs, Steve, but prepare yourself for a doosey."

Before Steve had a chance to brace himself, Dustin was giving Steve the best and gentlest hug he could manage in their current situation. It took Steve only a minute to wrap the hand that didn't have an IV in

it around Dustin as well.

They stayed like that in a comfortable silence, which was broken only by sniffles from Dustin. "Let it out, man," Steve said as he started rubbing circles on the younger boy's back. "Just let it out. You'll feel better."

Dustin just shook his head against Steve's shoulder. "I did already. Twice. I just can't get them to stop."

"Stick your tongue on the roof of your mouth," Robin interrupted. In unison, Steve and Dustin looked over to see her flipping through a magazine and pointedly pretending to ignore them. "That's what brides are supposed to do on their wedding day."

Steve felt Dustin's face scrunch as he tried it, but then Dustin shook his head again. "It didn't work."

It was at that moment that Steve realized there was no adult for Dustin standing in the doorway, and his heart began to race in his chest. After all he'd been through today, he did not need to deal with an irate Mrs. Henderson. "Does your mom know you're here?"

Thankfully, Dustin nodded. "Yeah, she's down the hall with Mrs. Wheeler and Mrs. Byers. No one's getting admitted like you two. Max, Mike, and Jonathan are fine—physically. El needs some gnarly stitches but she's free to go after that too." Then Dustin looked over his shoulder at the clock affixed to the wall. "I gotta go back though. I said I'd only be gone five minutes." He scrubbed at his eyes again then stood up. "I'll come tomorrow though if you're still here. Do you need anything?"

"Just mah discharge forms," Steve drawled.

Dustin smiled weakly, then shuffled out the door. "G'night, Steve. And thanks."

He didn't elaborate on exactly what he was thankful for, but Steve's response would have been the same, no matter what Dustin had actually said. "Anytime, squirt."

As Dustin's footsteps disappeared down the hall, Robin slammed her

magazine closed and leaned back in bed. "They're not so bad, dingus." Before Steve could reply, she rolled onto her side with her back to him, effectively ending any potential conversation. "Night."

As much as Steve wanted sleep to steal him, even temporarily, away from the soul-sucking ache of consciousness, he was still awake at midnight... at one... at two. Robin had no such issues and was softly snoring on the other side of the room.

So much had happened over the past thirty-six hours and it was all so much worse than anything that had happened the past two years. Before, it had been monsters and supernatural beings and other things Steve didn't pretend to understand. They were scary in their own right, but this year, it had been humans. Humans who had no qualms about torturing a nineteen year old for information. Humans who had been about to pull out his fingernails and do god knows what else unless Robin had spoken up.

They'd done it all without changing expressions, like it was just another day on the job.

That scared the shit out of Steve.

His fight with Billy last year, Steve'd somewhat expected. He'd put up with increasing doses of Billy's anger throughout the year, and had known it was only a matter of time before Billy truly went off the rails. What Steve hadn't expected was for the confrontation to happen at the Byers, with the kids, after Billy threatened to, and almost succeeded in, beating Lucas.

But what had happened with the Russians was so sudden, so shocking, that Steve had been completely caught off-guard. Thinking about it, his chest began to tighten, keeping him from breathing in fully, and the room and his very skin begin to feel smaller, tighter, closer. The shadows in the corner were creeping in. His hands were getting cold. His body tensed. Afraid this was another Mind Flayer trick, Steve looked over at Robin, who continued to sleep peacefully. Damn her.

Steve tried to count the good things to ground himself in the now—

the fact that the kids were okay; that the mall had blown up, taking the Russians and the underground base with it—but he was too far gone.

"You should think about talking to someone," Wilkins had said, after checking that Steve had heard about Hopper's passing and sticking another knife to Steve's already injured gut.

Steve had nodded, but had secretly vowed he wouldn't. Any therapist would think he was crazy and those who knew the secret of Hawkins had too much else to deal with. Max had lost Billy—who hadn't deserved to die, despite how awful he was. Especially not in front of Max. He should have moved back to California after graduation and started a life he actually enjoyed living, and not been around for the Mind Flayer to turn into a puppet. Everyone else had lost Hopper, who had been their rock through the two previous attacks. Between her dad and her powers, El had lost the most, and the party was going to have their hands full keeping both her and Max above water. No one needed the extra burden of what had happened to him in that room.

If Steve didn't say or do something right this very minute, though, he was going to lose his mind before breakfast. Since running was way out of his range of abilities at the moment, he decided a walk to anywhere but here would suffice.

He bit back the litany of curses as he crawled out of bed and clutched desperately to his IV pole to stay upright. He clung there for a beat, feeling the gnawing in his stomach diminish and his skin relax ever so slightly. Getting out of here had absolutely been the right choice.

Steve shuffled out of the room at an agonizing pace, but only made it about two doors down before his knees threatened to give out. He was sure as hell not calling the hospital staff, who would definitely make him stay another day, so he just leaned against the guardrail until he caught his breath.

When he was no longer in danger of becoming human Gumby, Steve looked over at the room he was slumped against. Patti Welch, the tag on the door read, and inside, an elderly woman was fast asleep.

A strange and somewhat weird idea wormed its way into his brain, and before he'd fully contemplated it, he was stepping into Patti Welch's room and dropping into the chair just inside the doorway.

"Hi, Ms. Welch, how are you?" Steve said softly. The older woman just choked on a snore and kept sleeping.

Perfect.

"So a lot happened to me recently, and I really need to get it off my chest. I can't tell my friends, because they've all been through their own stuff. You don't mind if I tell you, do you?"

He received another hearty snore in response, so he reached behind him and pushed the door closed.

"Thank you. I'll try to be quick." He took a deep breath, ignored the clawing sensation in his gut, and began, "it all started when my friend got back from camp." The floodgate was now open and the words were spilling out of Steve's mouth almost faster than he could control. He was sure his story made no sense since he was backtracking to fill in details, some of which he was still a little fuzzy on, because they'd been told to him in passing. He stuttered on the part about his interrogation but didn't hold back any details, even as a thick lump formed in his throat.

With every bit he shared, a small, almost microscopic weight lifted from his shoulders. He knew this feeling wasn't going to be permanent, but right now he'd take any gain he could get.

He told Ms. Welch about Hopper and El and about what happened to him—to them—eighteen months ago, about how it changed him, about how it set his life's plans spinning off track. He told her about Barb and Billy, who were his age and now were gone, leaving him wondering who might be next. He only paused to steal some of her water, or to make sure she was still asleep.

When he was done, he exhaled loudly and felt his ribcage once again expand with his inhale. Victory.

He couldn't revel in the moment though; he needed to get back

before the hospital staff noticed he was missing—if they hadn't already.

"Thank you for listening," he said as he heaved himself to his feet. Unfortunately, it ended up being more difficult than he was expecting, given that his entire body had adopted a leaden quality while he'd been speaking, but in the end, he was successful.

He hobbled back to his room at half his earlier speed, then carefully eased himself back to bed. He thought he'd been quiet enough to not disturb Robin, but just as he was closing his eyes, he heard her murmur, "Feel better, dingus?"

He considering lying, just to be contrary, but then decided there was no reason to. "Yes, actually," he replied as he shifted until he found the one position that hurt the least.

He received only a hum of affirmation in response, and not long after, Robin's breaths evened out as she drifted off. This time, lighter thanks to his conversation with Ms. Welch, Steve felt himself doing the same.

Thanks for reading! I'd love to know what you thought!

(I'm on Tumblr: usaOneTwoThree)